

2007

Chores

Debra Marquart

Iowa State University, marquart@iastate.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/engl_pubs



Part of the [Nonfiction Commons](#)

The complete bibliographic information for this item can be found at http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/engl_pubs/163. For information on how to cite this item, please visit <http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/howtocite.html>.

This Creative Writing is brought to you for free and open access by the English at Iowa State University Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Publications by an authorized administrator of Iowa State University Digital Repository. For more information, please contact digirep@iastate.edu.

Chores

Abstract

There is a gravel road about a quarter-mile long leading out of my parents' farm in North Dakota that leads to another gravel road about a half-mile long, which eventually meets up with Highway 3, the two-lane blacktop that runs through my hometown. When I was a kid, I sat for hours in my brother's bedroom facing the highway, and I kept a running tally of how many cars and trucks passed our farm...

Disciplines

Nonfiction

Comments

Originally published as "Chores." The Best Creative Nonfiction, Vol. 1. Ed. Lee Gutkind. Norton: New York, 2007. Posted with permission.

Chores

DEBRA MARQUART

Debra Marquart originally planned to be a rock star, until a truck fire destroyed all of her road band's equipment. Following the loss, Marquart turned to writing. "I hope there's still evidence of singing in my writing," she says. "And I hope there's evidence of fire, a feeling that my sentences burned to be written—that they are forged from the strongest materials."

This excerpt from Marquart's memoir, The Horizontal World: Growing Up in the Middle of Nowhere, originally appeared in Orion.

There is a gravel road about a quarter-mile long leading out of my parents' farm in North Dakota that leads to another gravel road about a half-mile long, which eventually meets up with Highway 3, the two-lane blacktop that runs through my hometown. When I was a kid, I sat for hours in my brother's bedroom facing the highway, and I kept a running tally of how many cars and trucks passed our farm—

their color, make, model, and whether the vehicle was traveling north or south. I yearned for movement back then, for escape.

I spent a lot of time walking—restless, aimless pacing, down the gravel road, along the section lines, always kicking stones, walking with my head down, searching for some evidence that something had happened on this barren strip of land.

I drew maps with large Xs on them, marking the spot where surely treasure would be found. I looked for chipped arrowheads, a stone carving, an agate, an unusual rock formation—anything to prove that someone or something, a nomadic tribe or an ancient glacier, had passed through before me.

“You can’t get there from here,” my father used to say when I spoke too long or enthusiastically about the cities I planned to someday run away to. I had consulted maps; I thought I knew otherwise. Did he mean to imply that our gravel road was not connected to other roads and highways, and that those freeways had not been paved and multi-laned in preparation for my flight?

MY THREE OLDER sisters had made their rapid getaways after high school—the two oldest to college, the third to marriage and children in town. One by one, their belongings were packed into cars that disappeared down the gravel road. Their old bedrooms became my pick of bedrooms. Pretty soon I had the top floor of the house to myself, and I was left alone with my parents on that farm with so many chickens to feed, so many cows to milk, and so much land to work.

From sunup to sundown, my parents ran frantically from place to place trying to perform all the chores that kept the farm afloat. Because I was a teenager, and none of this had been my idea, I determined to make myself as useless as possible. The most my father could do was assign me small jobs from season to season.

One of my early chores was running the DeLaval cream separator,

a machine that worked its transforming magic in a cozy closet off the milk room. In this sanctum sanctorum ordinary milk was poured into a large stainless-steel bowl on top of the whirring, spinning separator. By some alchemy, the liquid filtered through the layers of the machine. After a great deal of noise and centrifugal gyration, the separator brought forth cream that flowed like gold from one of the spigots below.

From the second spigot appeared the now-skimmed milk, which was quickly mixed back in with the whole milk in the pot-bellied bulk cooler. Every few days, a driver arrived in our yard with a refrigerated tanker truck capable of siphoning from the cooler the many gallons of milk we extracted from our cows. This was taken to Wishek Cheese, a factory in a town about twenty-five miles to the southeast.

But the cream had choicer destinations. It was collected in pint and quart jars, each marked with the names of people in town who had ordered fresh farm cream. Mother hand-delivered the jars the next day.

Of all the chores I had to do on the farm, I liked running the separator the best. The milk room was warmer than the rest of the barn, and my primary responsibility was to keep the cats away from the cream. I took a book and read as the noisy machine churned and shook the life from the milk. Around me, things were filled and emptied; cream poured from spouts; jars were whisked away; and I was left to read my book hunched over in the dim light.

At my feet, tabbies and tomcats, tuxedos and calicos, milled and meowed. They craned their necks and howled with tortured voices. They tried to scale my pant legs, their claws out, just to get a quick paw, a stretched tongue, anything, into that golden stream. I would shoo and bat them away, absorbed in thought, clutching my book and reading all the while about all the strange places and marvelous people in the outside world.

PERHAPS SEPARATION became my special talent, because at thirteen my father put me in charge of separating the calves from the cows when it was time to wean them from their mothers' milk.

On this day, the cows are herded into the barn, their udders heavy with milk. As usual, they file in and put their necks through the stanchions lining the barn. The slats are closed around their necks to hold them in place during milking. But as they enter the barn, their calves are culled away and taken by me to a separate pen I have prepared for them with fresh straw in another part of the barn.

At first the cows don't realize what's happening. They move through the enclosures and gates in their docile way. They eat the oats put in place for them inside the stanchions. But once outside the barn, after milking, they begin to look around, to sniff, as if trying to recall something they've forgotten. They turn their long necks; they swish their tails. Nothing.

Then they begin to call out, low mooing, until the calves answer. The cows moo and moo in the direction of the calves' voices, and the calves bleat back. This goes on for hours. The crying becomes unbearable. The calves look so small in their holding pen. They stick their heads through the fence, their bodies shaking as they wail. They push their hungry voices toward their mothers' frantic calling: "Where are you? Where are you?"

"Here I am. Here I am."

The separation of an offspring from a parent. It's the most unnatural event. You feel cruel when you're the one enforcing it. On those days, I will myself not to think about it. I only know that it's my job to feed them. I step into the holding pen with buckets of the warm milk I've mixed from powder. Our farm depends upon the real milk the mothers produce. I must convince the calves to accept the substitute.

One by one I take the bawling face of a calf into my hands; I dip my fingertips in the milky liquid in the bucket that rests hard-edged and

shiny silver between my legs; I slip my wet fingers into the mouth of the crying calf. One by one they begin to suck, from exhaustion and hunger and instinct—the soft sandpaper tongue, the little pricks of new teeth on my fingertips, the slurping as they finally dip their snouts into the bucket of milk.

As they drink, the calves cry and hiccough. I stroke the curls on their soft foreheads. One by one they lie down in their new straw beds, stretch their long downy necks, and sleep.

They quiet this way, one after the other, until all is silent in the calf shed, but the crying in the mothers' holding pen doesn't stop. It goes on through the night and into the next day, sometimes for hours, sometimes for days.

GROWING UP ON a farm, you see and do things you later wish you hadn't. I have castrated, for example—or rather, I have sat on top of a high, narrow corral, pressed tight the heaving flank of a bull calf with all the strength my legs could muster, looped and yanked his thick tail high in the air and to the side so that my father could come in and castrate.

I've seen the long-handled pincers at work, seen the Rocky Mountain oysters roll in the dirt like two dislodged eyeballs, glossy as pearl onions. I've known people who fry up these delicacies, sauté them in butter, and eat them like tender scallops. I've also known people who eat those turkey gizzards that float in pickling juices in five-gallon jars on the counters of backwater bars, although I have not been one of those people.

If you stay in the Midwest long enough and you go to the right places, you'll encounter all kinds of stuff. I've seen manure, for example, in an amazing variety of colors and consistencies. I have sprayed it with a hose, swept it into gutters, scraped it, buried it, burned it, and shoveled it. I've been up to my bootstraps in it, shit threatening to suck

me down as I tried to step through it, spreading straw with a pitchfork so that the cows could lie one more day in it.

I've seen it in pastures—huge cow pies sprouting mushrooms, amazing droppage buzzing with flies, full of grass, seeds, and maggots, or dried flat as a Frisbee along the trail. There's a certain shade of it, an orangish, mustardy yellow with an almost fluorescent glow, called scours, which is a signal that you probably have a very sick calf on your hands. Clothing designers have embraced this color, reproducing it lately by some unnatural combination of dyes, and when I see it in stores in the shapes of fashionable blouses, sweaters, and pants, I can't help but think of my father standing in the calf shed, pointing to the troubling pile and then scanning the pen for the calf that's on its back, the calf with the scruffy coat, the calf with the emaciated, curving ribs.

In the milk barn, I have seen Holsteins go on happily eating their oats as they raise their tails and let loose shit with such force, shoot it like projectile vomit across the aisle of the barn, nailing another cow or some unlucky person who may be walking through the barn at that moment. To be around for cleanup after something like this has happened is to understand what chores are.

CHORES—EVEN THE word registers a feeling for the task at hand: "I've gotta go home and do chores." Never singular, always plural, a job that interrupts some fun you're having, then grows and grows like polyps in an intestine. One syllable quickly spat out or yelled up creaky stairs, the word *chores* describes a job so unsavory that to spend the energy using two syllables means you'd probably never get around to doing it.

It's best to turn away from chores, pretend you didn't hear the call, hope someone else will do them, better to turn back to the softness and warmth of your own bed, back to the brush of cotton and the sweet downy smell of sheets, than to skitter across cold wood floor in

the dark, pull on old clothes and worn smelly shoes, and go out into the drafty, shit-smeared places where chores are done.

I have been pulled from my bed in my white nightgown after I've disregarded my mother's first and second calls, my father's third call for chores. I have been taken down to the big backyard near the chicken coop to help with butchering the hens.

My mother has already started. She is cutting necks. My grandmother kneels beside her, also cutting. Between them is a growing pile of chicken heads, wall-eyed, astonished open beaks, the stunned crop of white feathers against the pink wavy flesh of fading combs.

My oldest sister, Kate, is galloping around the yard like the cloaked angel of death, snaring chickens with a long wire leg-catcher. When she traps them by the ankle, they squawk wildly, trying to catch the ground with the other leg and run away until she lifts them in the air and hands them, wings flapping, feathers flying loose, over to the neck cutters. In this way, my sister is god today.

My second-oldest sister, Elizabeth, is retrieving the chickens from the headless places they have flown to. Around and around she runs, looking for the vivid sprays that will signal a chicken is nearby—blood rising in fountains on the white stucco walls of the chicken coop, blood bucking up against the trunks of cottonwoods, blood in soaked patches on the grass, the red-iron smell of oxidization strewn across the dewy green lawn.

As the youngest girl, I stand on the edge of this slaughter, guarding the three loads of laundry my mother has risen early to wash, the whites now flapping on the line. My mother is quick with the knife; her blade is sharp. She places the chicken on the ground, pulls its wings back, and severs the neck with one quick motion. Without turning to look up, she throws the bird into the air as if to separate herself from the act, then she grabs another live chicken.

My grandmother kneels beside her, moving more slowly. She cuts

off the head, then holds her hand around the chicken's neck, tilting it like a wine bottle she means to pour down to nothing. Under her knee, the chicken bumps and claws until all the electrical impulses that drive its muscles are finished. Beside her is a large red pool running down the hill. And so, it seems, there are at least two ways to butcher a chicken.

The water is already boiling in tubs up the hill in the barn where we go to pluck the feathers. Sitting in a circle, we grasp the upturned claws and dip the chickens in steaming water. The feathers come off in clumps and drop into another tub between us. The smell is complex—water meets wool meets vinegar meets dirt—like wet fur, like bad feet.

We pluck the strong wing feathers with their deep roots and peel away the body's blanket of feathers. Then we rub the skin for the downy layer and pick away the tiny pinfeathers nestling inside the deep pockets of skin.

ACROSS THE YARD, Mother is in the milk house with the burning candle. She is the fire woman singeing the plucked bodies as she passes them over the flame. The room smells of sulfur, the deep-caked odor of burnt hair and flesh. Grandmother sits beside her, on a stool in front of the sink. She is the last one to receive the bodies.

She places the chicken on its back before her and opens the bird's legs, looking for the soft spot unprotected by bone. "The pooper," she says, "the last part to go over the fence." She repeats these words all day again and again to keep us from fainting.

She draws a sharp blade across the film of skin between the legs. A world of steaming darkness spills out into which she must thrust her hand, extracting the long weave of intestines, the soft gray lungs, the heart, the liver, the tiny green row of developing egg yolks, the brown

gizzard, all swimming in a gelatinous ooze. Carefully she finds the small sac of bile, the green-black poison that, if ruptured, will ruin the meat of the bird, and she cuts it away.

Only she knows how to distinguish the edible from the throwaway parts. She crops the feet from the body with a hard crunch of her knife and trims away the claws, the dirt still packed tight under the nails from the chicken's constant scratching for food. We recoil when she places the trimmed yellow feet on the edible pile. She'll take them home in a bag to Grandpa at the end of the day, and we have no idea what they do with them.

And when she holds the gizzard in her palm like a warm bun and draws a blade along the edge, turning the sac inside out to show us the chicken's last supper, I expect to see bottle caps, shiny pennies, diamond rings inside, but I find only an undigested clump of oats, a few tiny bits of gravel.

At the end of the day, we tuck in the wings and legs, slipping the naked birds into the dozens of water-filled milk cartons my mother has been saving all year for freezing the meat. She sets aside four of the biggest birds for frying that night.

"Mmm, girls," she says, "just think—fresh chicken."

"Ughh," I say to Grandmother as we walk the red wheelbarrow to the dump ground to bury the parts, the metallic tinge of blood still in my mouth.

"Do I really have to eat it?" I ask.

I could use a few days for amnesia to set in. But Grandmother tells me I must. I must learn to know the taste of what my hands have done on my tongue.